



Kingdom Season

18 November 2018

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Daniel 12:1-3, Hebrews 10:11-25, Mark 13:1-8

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Last week Kara preached about peace, calling us to look for opportunities for peace. Her sermon last week has influenced mine for today, albeit indirectly. For today's Old Testament and Gospel Lessons are more about the opposite – especially the passage from the Gospel of Mark.

It is against the backdrop of Kara's sermon last week that verses 5 & 6 jumped out at me: Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray.

Mark 13 is an Apocalyptic Discourse. Apocalypticism is a way of religious thinking that permeates the New Testament. It is characterized by a 1) sense of despair about history that leads to the belief that history is hurtling to a foreordained, tragic climax. However, this despair is paired with the 2) hope that God will act in that climactic moment to change things utterly and completely for the better of those who trust in him. Moreover, apocalyptic writers believe God will give us signs that this climactic moment is on the way. Like all apocalyptic writings, this discourse is closely tied to tradition, quoting Daniel, 2 Chronicles and Isaiah in our lessons and in the course of the entire discourse quoting and alluding to numerous other texts in the Hebrew Bible.¹

We cannot understand this text without a little background – and without getting to its core. And the core is the pairing of despair and hope.

It is the nature of apocalyptic writers to interpret and re-interpret texts, even their own! So I feel comfortable in re-interpreting this text for us today.

I

Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. (Mk 13:5-6)

I want to start with Jesus's warning to his disciples. We need to hear it today just as much – if not more – than his disciples did 2000 years ago.

For there are many who come in Jesus's name. We call Yeshua bar Joseph – Jesus son of Joseph – Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ because we see in him the Messiah that God promised. He is, in other words, our savior.

And in this sense there are indeed many who come in Jesus's name. They take on the role of savior. Often they are religious. In their interpretation of Christianity, they lose sight of Jesus Christ and place themselves in the center – like a televangelist from Louisiana, Jesse Duplantis, who has recently asked his supporters for \$54 million for a fourth private jet. He says God told him to ask.² There are numerous preachers who promise those who give generously that they will have wealth, health and good luck. Pastor Chris from Nigeria is just one example from another continent. Those who sow a lot will reap even more later, they

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say. At least the preachers do. Basically, as the Zambian pastor Conrad Mbewe criticizes, they are doing the same thing that Martin Luther revolted against: selling indulgences.³

And we should not forget James Jones this weekend, the worst false prophet in my lifetime. Forty years years ago he led his followers in Jonestown in a mass suicide.

More dangerous, however, are those who are not explicitly religious. They are political and slip into the role of savior.

“I, I alone, can save you – I alone can guarantee you a job, save the country and protect us from our enemies.”

The enemies change. They can be the foreigners. They can be the people who do not look like us – or believe like us – or do not think or love like us. The structure of the argument is always the same. It is sort of like the work sheets we remember from school. You just have to fill in the blanks.

Yesterday in Germany it was – and still is today in many counties – the Jews. Currently, in Europe and the US it appears to be the Muslims for many on the right. For Trump and many of his supporters, this way of thinking goes hand in hand with subtle – and often not very subtle – racism against African-Americans.⁴ Duterte in the Philippines also fits this mold – or Bolsonaro in Brazil.

These politicians and presidents – and others in this mold – are more dangerous than the religious false prophets simply because they have more power.

Although I seriously question the judgment of their supporters, I can understand them. They have problems. They feel left behind, disadvantaged, exploited. And many of them very well are. They are desperate – and they want change. And they have lost hope. So they look for something that can give them hope – or someone who promises them hope.

II

However, our text continues. Jesus tells his disciples – and us – When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed.

We used to call such sketchy or false reports “rumors.” Now they are called “fake news.” Rumors make us insecure. We want to understand. We want to know what is going on. This is nothing new. “Fake news,” however, indicates to me that we have reached a new, a higher level of hysteria about not really understanding what is going on. It is a development that parallels the growing complexity of our world – politically, technologically and personally – and inspires conspiracy theories.

The false prophets understand that. An explanation – any explanation – is better than no explanation. It does not matter whether the explanation is logical or even true.

When it resonates with our fears, with our prejudices, when it helps us just to keep going, we believe it – and those who tell us. We believe because we cannot live without hope.

This lack of hope is what makes these rumours of wars, the “fake news,” so dangerous – so dangerous that they can lead to murders of innocent people as in the so-called WhatsApp murders in India, for example

III

But, as Dan 12:1 reminds us, at that time your people shall be delivered. At that time, When [we] hear of wars and rumours of wars, WE shall be delivered.

God’s people, we who trust in God, who have faith in God’s promises and guidance, even when we often do not understand it, shall persevere. We do not fall into despair, because we have hope – deep abiding hope that carries us through the hours and days when the future looks bleak and the burden of our sorrows or worries threatens to crush us. This is not a naïve faith. We do not deny that we have problems and often no answers. What we do have, however, is hope – and a loving community of fellow strugglers who support us and pray for us.

Our hope grows out of our trust. And this trust is rooted in humility, in the humble recognition that we are not in control. God is in control. Because God is in control, we can hope. We can dare to hope in the midst of confusion and pain.

The false prophets or leaders PRETEND to be in control. Maybe they really think they are in control. But we know better – at least most of the time.

When we and others succumb to false leaders and/or the rumors, the “fake news”, it is because we want to be in control – or at least trust someone who is, that is, who says she or he is!

In the sense that they usurp the role of savior and offer to deliver us from all our worries, these false prophets, whether they be religious or secular/political, all come in Jesus’s name – and lead us astray. Whoever then follows them, succumbs to his or her own version of Jesus’s temptation by Satan in the wilderness.

This is easy to understand – not being in control is scary! And I do not mean that it is unnecessary to plan, to have structure, to have goals and pursue them and try to manage our lives as best we can.

Jesus was pointing to something much deeper. He was pointing to a deep, fundamental trust in God that goes far beyond our everyday doubts and worries. It is a trust that carries us through these same doubts and worries.

But we know that. We pray it every Sunday in the Lord’s Prayer: thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Let us not forget it when the winds of chaos and despair batter our loved ones and us!

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When we take this prayer to heart, trust and continue to hope, we can persevere and continue to be peacemakers – and perhaps even sow some hope in the midst of despair.

Amen!

¹Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction*, New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1974, 65-66, 159.

²<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44305873>. Retrieved: November 17, 2018, 6:19 PM.

³<https://allafrica.com/stories/201705230572.html>. Retrieved November 17, 2018, 6:40 PM.

⁴See Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism*, London: I.B. Taurus, 2016.